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It's Elementary

A Monthly Column by EFAP Director John Yinger
May 2013

A Tribute to William D. Duncombe

My dear friend and colleague, Bill Duncombe, passed away on May 11. He was 57 years old. The losses to his family, friends and colleagues, to the Maxwell School, and to scholarship on education finance are incalculable.¹

Bill was a Ph.D. student in public administration when I arrived at the Maxwell School in the fall of 1986. He and I hit it off right away and we started working together. Our first publication together grew out of his dissertation, and we went on to publish 19 more articles or book chapters together, along with many working papers, reports, op-eds, and policy briefs. We also served on many committees together, especially dissertation committees, and became fast friends.

Bill was an extraordinary scholar and an extraordinary person.

His data-gathering skills were legendary. One time he came into my office and told me that he had put together a detailed data set covering a couple decades for all the rural school districts in New York State, including twelve pairs of districts that had consolidated. He asked me if I thought this data set would be useful for studying consolidation. He knew the answer, of course, and was just trying to rope me in—which he did. The eventual result was an article in *Education Finance and Policy* in 2007 and dozens of phone calls from school officials interested in our finding that consolidation can save small school districts a great deal of money.

Bill also assembled complex data sets on education finance for California, Kansas, Maryland, Missouri, Nebraska, and New York. These data sets led to publications, court documents, or Bill's testimony, all of which had a significant impact on education finance reform in these states. Bill was also master at devising and programming complex statistical procedures to apply to these data sets. Moreover, he was very well informed about the conceptual issues that arise in studying education finance, and our thousands of conversations on the topic invariably led to better formulations than either of us would have come with on our own.

Actually, I think it is our conversations that I will remember the most. Not our individual conversations. In fact, I have trouble remembering conversations I had this morning! Instead, I remember how we pushed each other to come up with the best theory, data, and methods we

¹ A formal obituary for Bill can be found at: <http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/news.aspx?id=107374186876>.

possibly could; how amazed I often was at the amount Bill had accomplished since our last conversation; how committed Bill was to the fair treatment of our colleagues and students; how we made each other laugh; and how unfailingly kind Bill was in all his dealings with me and, for that matter, with everyone else.

Most of Bill's and my joint research addresses topics in education finance, particularly education cost functions and their implications for state aid to education. I have published a few articles on education finance without Bill as a formal co-author, but he has had an enormous influence on my thinking about this subject, and his fingerprints are all over everything I have written on education finance since I started working with him—and will be all over everything I write on this subject in the future.

The Public Administration Department in the Maxwell School is pretty amazing. Ever since I came Maxwell, it has been a very collegial place with high, but fair standards for scholarship and teaching. This type of environment does not arise by accident, but is instead sustained by the commitment and character of the people involved. Since he joined the faculty in 1991, Bill set the standard for us all. He was the first person at work in the morning and the last person to leave at night—with the possible exception of a junior faculty member about to come up for tenure. He treated everyone with kindness and respect. He was remarkably generous with his time, scheduling extra sessions for his MPA students, writing detailed comments on draft after draft of his Ph.D. students' dissertations, providing extensive feedback to his colleagues on their research projects, and volunteering for time-consuming committee assignments. Bill's exceptional example will undoubtedly continue to contribute to the PA Department for many, many years to come.

Over the next several months, many of us at the Maxwell School will be working to preserve Bill's scholarly legacy. We plan to gather and post on the EFAP web site many of the data sets he assembled. We also plan to make much of his scholarly work accessible through the EFAP site. As a first step in these efforts, his publications on education finance are listed below.

William D. Duncombe's Publications on Education Finance

- Wang, Wen, William Duncombe, and John Yinger. 2011. "School District Responses to Matching Aid Programs for Capital Facilities: A Case Study of New York's Building Aid Program." *National Tax Journal* (3) 64 (September): 759-794.
- Duncombe, William, and John Yinger. 2011. "Are Education Cost Functions Ready for Prime Time? An Examination of Their Validity and Reliability." *Peabody Journal of Education* (1) 86: 28-57.
- Duncombe, William and John Yinger. 2011. "Making Do: State Constraints and Local Responses in California's Education Finance System." *International Tax and Public Finance* 18: 337-368.
- Duncombe, William and Wen Wang. 2009. "School Facilities Funding and Capital Outlay Distribution in the States." *Journal of Education Finance*, (3) 34 (Winter): 324-350.
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- Balter, Dana, and William Duncombe. 2008. "Recruiting Highly Qualified Teachers: Do District Recruitment Practices Matter?" *Public Finance Review*. (1) 36 (January): 33-62.
- Duncombe, William, Anna Lukemeyer, and John Yinger. 2008. "The No Child Left Behind Act: Have Federal Funds Been Left Behind?" *Public Finance Review* (4) 36 (July): 381-407.
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- Duncombe, William and John Yinger. 2007. "Measurement of Cost Differentials." In H. Ladd and T. Fiske (eds.) *Handbook of Research in Education Finance and Policy*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 257-275.
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- Duncombe, William. 2006. "Responding to the Charge of Alchemy: Strategies for Evaluating the Reliability and Validity of Costing-Out Research." *Journal of Education Finance*, (2) 21 (Fall): 137-159.

- Duncombe, William and John Yinger. 2005. "How Much More Does a Disadvantaged Student Cost?" *Economics of Education Review*, (5) 24 (October): 513-532.
- Bifulco, Robert, William Duncombe, and John Yinger. 2005. "Does Whole-School Reform Boost Student Performance: The Case of New York City" *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, (1) 24 (Winter): 47-72.
- Ammar, Salwa, William Duncombe, Bernard Jump, Ronald Wright. 2005 "A Financial Condition Indicator System for School Districts: A Case Study of New York." *Journal of Education Finance*, (30) 3 (Winter): 231-258.
- Ammar, Salwa, William Duncombe, Bernard Jump, Ron Wright. 2005. "Avoiding Fiscal Stress: The Use of Expert Systems to Assess School District Financial Condition" *Developments in School Finance: 2004-05, Fiscal Proceedings from the Annual State Data Conferences of July 2004*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- Baker, Bruce and William Duncombe. 2004. "Balancing District Needs and Student Needs: The Role of Economies of Scale Adjustments and Pupil Need Weights in School Finance Formulas." *Journal of Education Finance*, (29) 3 (Winter): 195-222.
- Duncombe, William and Jocelyn Johnston. 2004. "The Impacts of School Finance Reform in Kansas: Equity Is In the Eye of the Beholder." In J. Yinger (ed.), *Helping Children Left Behind*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 147-194.
- Ammar, Salwa, William Duncombe, Bernard Jump, Ronald Wright. 2004. "Constructing a Fuzzy-Knowledge-Based System: An Application for Assessing the Financial Condition of Public Schools." *Expert Systems with Applications*, (27) 3: 349-364.
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